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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE RCD?: RULING PARTY WRAPS UP
CONGRESS

REF: A. TUNIS 859
[1](#)B. TUNIS 847

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) held its congress, which takes place once every five years, from July 30 - August 2. The most notable development came on July 30, when President Ben Ali announced he would seek re-election for a fifth five year term in 2009. The RCD also voted on general resolutions meant to guide the party, and changed the composition of the RCD's Central Committee (the party's governing body). End Summary.

Getting to Know the RCD

[1](#)2. (C) The ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) holds a congress once every five years, in the year preceding presidential elections. 2,715 delegates met July 30 - August 2 to decide on the party platform and elect new (or old) leadership. The President of the party is Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Other senior RCD figures include Secretary General Hedi M'henni and the six Deputy Secretary Generals in charge of Structures, Youth Education and Culture, Organizations and Associations, Women, Foreign Relations, and Future Programs. The RCD counts 2.2 million members among its 8,803 local chapters. The party is governed by the Central Committee, which meets every six years or at the President's request. In July, the RCD added 93 members to the Central Committee for a total of 343. As part of the RCD's youth outreach initiative, 63 of those added were under the age of 30, among which was the President's son-in-law (Ref B).

Technically Speaking...

[1](#)3. (C) Events during the RCD party congress, whose theme was "Challenge," started out a bit out of order. Traditionally, after the President opens the Congress, elections of senior party leadership, including a president, take place, after which the President declares his intention to seek re-election. This year, Ben Ali announced he would run for re-election, "in response to your (the people's) appeal," during his opening speech on July 30 (Ref A). Though his candidacy was a forgone conclusion, some observers opined that his announcement was premature, since it technically came before Ben Ali was re-elected president of the party. At the Congress, the President's announcement was

met with jubilation and chants of "God is unique. Nobody is like Ben Ali!" Ben Ali stated that his candidacy respected the rule of law, and seemed to suggest he would not seek additional terms after 2009 by saying, "We consider that the people's choice is the rule for alternation, and that the Constitution is the decisive arbiter for all." (Note: The Constitution was amended in 2002, raising the age limit for presidential contenders to 75 and eliminating presidential term limits. Barring further amendments, Ben Ali is eligible to run in 2009, but not beyond.)

The Powers That Be

14. (C) The other major announcement to come out of the RCD Congress was the composition of the RCD's Central Committee (the party's governing body). The Central Committee is made up of 350 members, 174 of which are elected; the rest are appointed to the Committee by the President. The RCD publishes its list of Central Committee members in rank order. Among those who are present on this year's Central Committee list, but were not part of the 2003-2008 Committee are Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed (Chairman of the Poulina Group holding company) who is number 87 on the list, Minister of Defense Kamel Morjane who is number 105, and Sakr El Matri (the President's son-in-law), who is 188. Overall, 77 percent of the previous Central Committee members retained their positions. Among those previously on the list, but who are not on this year is Secretary General of the Arab Maghreb Union and former Tunisian Ambassador to the United States Habib Ben Yahia.

15. (C) Most RCD notables retained their approximate ranking from 2003, though a few jumped significantly either up or down. RCD First Vice-President Hamed Karoui retains his place at number one on the new RCD Central Committee list; Tunisian Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi also kept his former spot at number 6. Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelwaheb Abdallah jumped from number 32 on the list in 2003 to number 23 in 2008. The head of the Americas group in the Chamber of Deputies Tijani Haddad also moved significantly from number 63 to 49, along with Senior Political Advisor to the President Mohamed Ghariani who moved from 48 to 35. Current RCD Secretary General Hedi M'henni jumped from number 16 to 12, President of the governmental Economic and Social Council Sadok Chaabane went from number 18 to 13, and Minister of Public Health Mondher Zenaïdi went from 20 to 15. President Ben Ali's Chief of Staff Ahmed Iyadh Ouederni moved up a few notches (21 to 16), along with Minister of Justice Bechir Tekkari (23 to 17), President of the governmental Higher Commission for Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties Moncer Rouissi (23 to 18), Governor of the Central Bank Taoufik Baccar (26 to 20), and Minister of the Interior Rafik Bel Haj Kacem (24 to 21). The President of the Chamber of Advisors Abdallah Kallel moved slightly from the number 9 spot to number 8, as did Special Advisor to the President Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, (who went from 11 to 10) and Minister of Transportation Abderrahim Zouari who moved up from 12 to 11.

RCD Party Platform

16. (C) In addition to electing new RCD leadership, members of the Congress also approved a number of resolutions that were before several RCD committees. Though no specific proposals were put forth, the resolutions are meant to direct the actions of the RCD over the next few years. For example, the Commission of Political Training decided that the RCD should devote more resources to training its members. Among the more notable resolutions was the Commission of Culture and Information's decision to encourage press outlets to devote more time to the concerns of young people. The Commission of Economic Affairs and Regional Durable Development also approved a motion to promote tourism (especially local handicrafts), promote the use of renewable

energy sources, and to encourage investment by improving the investment climate.

Comment

17. (C) The lack of substance in the RCD's "platform" is telling: against the backdrop of rising cost of staple goods and unemployment, which have generated protests in the south, the RCD's committees mainly put forth vague proposals and propaganda. Various civil society groups have been calling for concrete government action to address the concerns that gave rise to those protests, but none were forthcoming from the RCD Congress. To the RCD, however, Ben Ali's ideas were, "pragmatic and ambitious and introduced new concepts such as citizenship, good governance, and democracy."

18. (C) What was not announced during the Congress was the identity of the new RCD Secretary General. This may have been because Ben Ali is planning a government reshuffle, and was not prepared to announce the full extent of changes. (A reshuffle has been widely rumored in Tunis, although it is not a certainty.) Also left unanswered was the question of who will be the party's sole vice-president (Ref A). Both Karoui and Ghannouchi, who until now were both serving as RCD Vice-Presidents, are prominently featured on the Central Committee list. The composition of the Central Committee list overall bodes well for the Embassy, as most the Embassy's regular contacts in the RCD moved up either slightly or significantly. The Embassy will continue to reinforce these contacts as influencing the RCD is tantamount to influencing the GOT. End Comment.
GODEC